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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides a list of questions parents should entertain in assessing and choosing a school for their child. The questions apply to schools in both the public and private system and span the full range of kindergarten through twelfth-grade institutions. They are meant to assist parents in evaluating whether the school is providing a demanding education that emphasizes traditional academic subject areas. The questions address the mission statement and goals of the school, the intellectual life of the school (including how the school deals with students with learning disabilities and gifted students), the ethical life of the school, the preparation and attitudes of the administration and faculty, student assessment, the school's approach to parents, the use of technology, and the costs of education and extracurricular activities. Many questions are followed with comments that point out important related concerns. (CR)

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QUESTIONS FOR YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

A Guide for Parents Who Value Learning

Charles J. Sykes / William G. Durden

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Parents can be a tremendous force in improving the quality of education for their own and for all American children. Parents need information and clear objectives, however, in order to serve as effective advocates for students.

Occasionally, parents are called on to decide, which school should my child attend? It is not simple to make the most of this key opportunity: tough questions must be directed toward the institutions under consideration.

These same questions are important at any moment in a student's education. Answers about schools should be available to parents throughout their child's years of study. What exactly do parents need to know? The following set of questions advances the expectations that can reasonably be entertained in thinking about individual schools.

This guide was composed by Charles J. Sykes, a senior fellow at the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute and author of the recent ***Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write or Add***, and William G. Durden, executive director of the Institute for the Academic Advancement of Youth (IAAY) of The Johns Hopkins University and author (with A. E. Tangherlini) of ***Smart Kids: How Academic Talents Are Developed & Nurtured in America.***

The authors' questions unabashedly promote a point of view: they advocate a rigorous, demanding education that emphasizes traditional academic subject areas. The questions insist that schools provide the spectrum of knowledge and the skills that can guide children toward becoming informed, productive adults—full participants in American and global civic society.

The questions apply to schools in both the public and the private systems; they span the full range of kindergarten through twelfth-grade institutions, but some focus more particularly on elementary, middle, or high school education. Some questions are amplified with comments that point out important related concerns.

Our broad array of questions may touch on some areas that mean more to you than others. As you read on, please consider which criteria are most important to you in shaping the education of your child.

Mission Statement and Goals

- **Does the school have a published mission statement and accompanying goals, and do faculty and administration reflect these goals in their daily practice?**

- **Do the school's goals and mission statement highlight the importance of the academic disciplines —mathematics, language arts, history, science, foreign languages?**

- **Do the school's goals and mission statement highlight the importance of character, citizenship, and academic achievement?** *(Cause for concern: excessive focus on self-esteem, coping skills, interpersonal skills, or wellness at the expense of academic preparation.)*

The Intellectual Life of Schools

- **Does the school have a reasonable class size?**

- **Are students encouraged to focus on fulfilling their own learning potential by advancing at their own pace through the academic disciplines?** *(Cause for concern: excessive reliance on cooperative learning; the frequent practice of obligating bright students to tutor other children.)*

- **Does the school honor its brightest students?** *(Cause for concern: non-recognition of distinctions in intellectual performance; minimal practice of flexible grouping for ability; restricted opportunities for students to test out of courses; lack of encouragement for students to seek academic challenges outside the school.)*

- **If a high school, does the school provide College Board Advanced Placement courses? If so, what proportion of students attend these classes, and what proportions receive 3's, 4's, and 5's on the national AP exams?**

- **Does the school's honor roll contain the names of a reasonable proportion of the student body?** *(Cause for concern: when students whose school performance is average or below average are on the honor roll.)*

- **Are the textbooks sufficiently demanding and readily available?** *(Cause for concern: textbooks at reading levels below that of relevant grade levels; insufficient textbooks available for students' classroom and homework use.)*

- **Does the school respond with sensitivity to how your child best learns and achieves?** *(Cause for concern: rigid tendencies toward highly*

structured instructional environments; rigid tendencies toward self-directed environments.)

- **At the elementary level, does the school teach reading through both systematic phonics—learning to read by attention to individual sounds—and substantive literature—sometimes called "whole language"?** *(Cause for concern: lack of clarity or candor in discussions with school staff about this issue; indications that one strategy or the other is treated superficially at best.)*

- **Does the school provide opportunities for enrichment that are genuinely enriching, engaging students at appropriately high intellectual levels and in substantive subject areas?** *(Cause for concern: enrichment that is of a "make-work" nature or that is irrelevant to a student's learning.)*

- **Does the school provide disciplined instruction in the arts?**

- **Does the school allow students to take courses elsewhere when it is in the best educational interests of the student to do so?** *(Cause for concern: schools that will not arrange for middle school students to take a course at the local high school or for high school students to take a course at a local college or university; schools that will not award credit or placement for out-of-school course work; schools that do not promote distance learning opportunities via computer or correspondence.)*

- **If you suspect that your child may have learning disabilities, are resources and services available for assessment and diagnosis?** *(Cause for concern: inadequate resources or services; resistance to accommodating unusual learning needs, such as those of students with learning disabilities* ***and*** *unusual academic strengths.)*

- **If you are ultimately dissatisfied with your child's school, does the school participate in a school choice program permitting students to transfer freely to another institution?**

- **Are there charter schools in the school district?** *(Under charter school programs, groups—parents, teachers, business people—contract with a public sponsor, usually the local school board.)*

The Ethical Life of Schools

- **Does the school provide forums for the discussion of ideas, values, and behavior that encourage individual accountability?** *(Cause for concern: the treatment of questions of ethics and sexuality as if they were open questions with no answers; the over-valuing of the concept of self-esteem; the advancing of positive self-concepts at the expense of personal responsibility and effort.)*

- **Do teachers maintain an appropriate level of authority in the classroom and elsewhere in the school?** (*Cause for concern: teachers who regard themselves as "facilitators"; teachers who encourage students to regard them as peers.)*

- **Does the school promote the dignity of the individual?** *(Cause for concern: schools that encourage students to over-identify with ethnic, racial, or gender groups; practices that promote group-based thinking instead of independent reflection.)*

- **Is the classroom environment conducive to learning?** *(Cause for concern: signs of chaos; too much emphasis on spontaneity and creativity at the expense of order and academic rigor.)*

- **Does the school offer a reasonably safe environment that can support genuine learning?** *(Cause for concern: lack of concern or programming for procedures to ensure safety; unwillingness*

to share records of legal or security infractions on the school premises; incidents that are not minor, especially any involving weapons.)

Administration and Faculty

- **Have teachers earned certification or advanced degrees in the subject matter that they teach?** (*Cause for concern: teachers with degrees in education, but without advanced training in their subject area.)*

- **Does the principal respond with enthusiasm and clarity to questions about your child's education?** *(Cause for concern: administrators who over-rely on educational jargon; administrators who sound indecisive or uninspired; administrators who make unclear references to education research; administrators who are consistently unavailable to speak with you or your child.)*

- **Does the school provide continuous in-service training and education to its faculty?** *(Cause for concern: training practices that routinely focus on school or classroom environment—i.e. total quality management, learning styles, enhancing self-esteem—and not on increasing teachers' expertise or instructional skills.)*

Assessment

- **Does the school provide clear learning expectations for your child at the beginning of each school year?** *(Cause for concern: the initiation of teacher-parent communication only for the purpose of reporting disciplinary infractions or end-of-term grades.)*

- **Do students receive letter or number grades, and do these grades seem meaningful?** *(Cause for concern: the replacement of grades with unclear measurements; high grades awarded for sub-standard work.)*

- **Among its various assessments of student progress, does the school administer nationally-normed standardized tests, and do the tests measure achievement beyond minimal competency?** *(Cause for concern: a reduced standardized testing program; lack of commitment to administering above-grade-level tests to high achieving students.)*

- **Do administrators and teachers openly discuss assessment practices, and do they provide statistics about school-wide or district-wide norms of results on standardized tests?** *(Cause for concern: schools that provide national norms only; national norms cannot provide information about your child's progress with respect to his or her school setting.)*

The School's Approach to Parents

- **Does the school encourage and maintain arenas for the active involvement of parents in supporting their child's academic achievement?**

- **Are the opportunities for parental involvement clearly delineated?**

- **Does the school permit you to choose—or at least have a voice in selecting—your child's teacher each year so that a positive learning situation is achieved?**

Technology

- **Does the school encourage teachers to obtain computer skills beyond basic keyboarding?**

- **Does the school provide technology (software and Internet options) and integrate this technology wisely into required academic work?**

- **Does the school encourage students to achieve a sophistication about new technologies that permits the making of connections and discoveries as well as discrimination among various knowledge bases?**

Costs:

- **Are you aware of all the costs—both up-front and hidden—that each school you are considering may transfer to you for your child's education and extracurricular activities?** *(This question applies to both private and public schools.)*

References:

Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write or Add, St. Martin's Press, 1995, by Charles J. Sykes, is readily available in bookstores throughout the United States.

Smart Kids: How Academic Talents Are Developed and Nurtured in America, Hogrefe and Huber, 1994, by William G. Durden and A. E. Tangherlini, can be ordered readily in bookstores throughout the United States.

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